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News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Veterans Justice Outreach program helps local Veterans

Some Veterans return from service and easily adjust back into civilian life. Some don't. There are Veterans within VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS) who return with physical injuries, traumatic brain injuries and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Veterans such as these sometimes find themselves involved in the court system after their service. When that happens, the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program reaches out to those Veterans, as VJO Specialist Joseph Casarez explained to the Rapid City and Pennington County law enforcement officials. These officials visited the VA BHHCS Rapid City Community Based Outpatient Clinic on October 24, as part of their annual Crisis Intervention Training.

"As a Marine Corp Veteran and former police officer, I have seen what war can do to a human being," Casarez said. "Combat Veterans are trained for war. This training is embedded so much in the minds of these Veterans that they can find themselves reacting as they were trained when they are confronted with situations they perceive as war. Unfortunately, Veterans can end up in trouble, especially if they don't receive treatment for PTSD related to their service."

Casarez explained that knowing how to recognize these PTSD or other mental health issues will help police officers de-escalate situations.

"VA police are trained in how to deal with Veterans with PTSD. They know how to treat Veterans in a manner that makes them feel safe and that they won't be harmed. In one such case, a Veteran later called me to express his appreciation on how the officers treated him with respect and understanding," Casarez said.

The VJO Program works to avoid the unnecessary criminalization of stress-related behaviors and mental illness, and extended incarceration among Veterans by ensuring that justice-involved Veterans who are eligible for VA services have timely access to health care services as clinically indicated. VA does not provide legal services. However, if contacted by the Veteran or law enforcement, the VJO specialist can assist the Veteran in getting PTSD treatment, substance abuse treatment and other mental health related treatment in a structured setting. Services are offered to the Veteran as soon as they are released from jail. The VJO Program also targets homelessness among justice-involved Veterans.

“When an individual goes to jail they lose their freedom,” Casarez said. “Many of them lose a lot more, including family, job and self-worth. I have had many Veterans thank me, because so many of them did not know what services were available for them as Veterans. Often times the judicial process is frightening for many who have never been involved with jail and the possibility of going to prison. Simply knowing that there is someone in their corner offering options and hope is a blessing beyond words for them.”

The VJO program helps ensure that VA never leaves behind justice-involved Veterans who have the potential to change their futures.

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